

CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the education of gifted and talented students

Berwick — 26 July 2011

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Ms F. Blaney, teacher,
Ms M. Desaulniers, teacher,
Mr S. Fankhauser, teacher, and
Mr W. Howarth, teacher, Nossal High School.

The CHAIR — We are now going to continue by hearing from the teachers. I would like to welcome Michelle, Franceska, Stuart and Wayne, who are teachers here at Nossal High School. I reiterate that today is a public hearing as part of the Education and Training Committee's inquiry into gifted and talented students. You are protected by parliamentary privilege, just as we are protected by parliamentary privilege, inside this room but not outside of the hearing. Today's hearing is being recorded by Hansard. You will have an opportunity to look at the transcript, and if any errors have been made, we can have them amended. Unlike the students, you will not have to repeat your name each time.

We have a fair bit to get through, so I ask that we try to keep answers to the point. Perhaps one or possibly two could answer. If there is something we have not picked up, there will be an opportunity at the end. We will get straight into it. I am going to start with teacher qualifications and training. Many of the submissions to the inquiry have suggested that in general Victorian teachers do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding to provide effective programs for gifted and talented students. What kind of qualifications and experience do Nossal teachers have in gifted education?

Mr HOWARTH — I think it varies according to the experience of individuals. We have some teachers who are further into their education in gifted education. We have an extensive professional learning program within the school that happens every week. We induct new members of staff into the school. They are made well aware of not only the types of challenges that they will be faced with but also the opportunities that exist for them and how to bring out the best in the students. That is further supported on an ongoing basis. It is further supported by links with Monash University. Only yesterday we saw evidence of our continuing relationship with Monash when experts in the field of gifted education came in to further enhance our understanding and knowledge about bringing out the best in the students.

Mr FANKHAUSER — I started at Nossal this year. I have relied a little bit on the staff who were here from the previous year and on their experience. I have learnt a lot from them in the last six months. Approaching gifted education is quite different to how I approached my teaching in my previous position. I have really enjoyed the conversations I have had with my colleagues. I think they have been of most value to me so far. The explicit PD that we have been able to have on Wednesday afternoons has been terrific, and it is very regular, which is also terrific. It just keeps the conversation going. It is very valuable to me.

The CHAIR — Just elaborating on that, in terms of professional development what sort of professional development do you have here to deal specifically with the area of students of high ability? Do you think that is helpful? What other things do you think might be needed?

Mr FANKHAUSER — For me, the value has been the links with researchers. They have such close links with various universities — Melbourne and Monash — and they come to our school and discuss their research to keep us abreast of the latest ideas. It has been extremely valuable. I do not know how that close connection can be maintained in every school around the state, but for us it has been absolutely terrific and very valuable.

Ms BLANEY — Our Principal has also been really good at providing us with a lot of reading material, so in a sense it is about that kind of professional development and keeping us up to date with things that are happening in gifted education. I am not from a gifted background, but certainly some of the meetings we have been provided with in relation to research have been valuable as well.

Ms DESAULNIERS — We look at the traits of gifted students, and we look at the differences between highly gifted students as opposed to high-achieving students. We are able to determine which of our students are in these two categories because you need to cater for their differences, which I know is coming up a bit later in the questions. That is part of our training and professional development. We are very fortunate to have Leonie Kronborg and Mary Plunkett from Monash. They talk to us about the latest research by Gagné, Hattie, Runzulli and Munro, so we get, as Frankie said, all that different reading in the area of gifted education.

The CHAIR — What characteristics do you think are needed for somebody teaching students in this particular area compared to somebody teaching students in a broader environment?

Ms DESAULNIERS — I do not think it is anything in particular; I think you just need to be a really good teacher. I think all schools need really good teachers, whether it is for a gifted or special education student or whether it is just in a mainstream school. You need to have an excellent rapport with the students. If you have a good rapport with students, they will connect with you and you will be a good teacher. You have to be a good

communicator. You need to have an excellent knowledge of your subject area here, because the students will find you out pretty quickly. We have kids here who will ask you university-style questions, and they are only in year 9. You have to have a good understanding of teaching and learning. You have to have a good sense of humour. You have to love what you do, but basically you need to be passionate. I think that all of our teachers in Victoria need to be passionate about teaching, not just here at Nossal.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the biggest challenges in teaching students of high ability and gifted students?

Ms BLANEY — There is a sense of an increased amount of accountability. It is not to say that you do not have that in mainstream education, but I think that is true in gifted education. Particularly coming from another public school I am more aware of what I am capable of because I am challenging myself every single day. It is not that I did not in the past, but I am being challenged in a completely different way because every day I am faced with 100 keen students who are highly motivated. That pushes me to the very depths of what I am capable of. I never thought I would be capable of some of the things I have already achieved this year. You are definitely more accountable, and you also have increased efficacy and craftsmanship as well.

Mr HOWARTH — I speak from a perspective of working with students — and coming from a huge background differential across all of Melbourne and sometimes even in country areas — as well as supporting their wellbeing, assisting them to connect with each other and the school initially and then managing the stress that some of the students spoke about, managing that with them and sometimes with their families, and setting themselves challenging but attainable goals.

I also help them to adjust to the fact that they may have been the no. 1 or 2 student in their year level in their previous school but in coming here with like-minded students they are with equally high-performing students. Sometimes they take a bit of time to adjust in terms of understanding that the results they achieved in the school they were at before are now different because the work — the depth and the pace at which we go through things — is at an enhanced level. Just managing all that from a wellbeing point of view is one of the challenges we all face in the school, particularly in my role.

Ms TIERNEY — Are individualised learning plans in place for all students?

Mr FANKHAUSER — I can talk about my personal experience in that, if you like. This also connects with the greatest challenges of being here, actually. Having the time to differentiate a course — there are multiple pathways or multiple ways in which a student can actually complete the requirements — is one of the hardest and time-consuming things. When I go home, on the weekend or when I am working at 10.30 or 11.00 o'clock at night, that is what I am focused on; I am creating podcasts or different ways the students can approach understanding the concepts I am covering in class. That just takes up an enormous amount of time, and that is what I have found the greatest challenge here.

Ms TIERNEY — Obviously you were not taught that as a trainee teacher?

Mr FANKHAUSER — No, as teachers we have to be very independent learners. That goes with what Michelle was saying a little earlier about being a passionate teacher. One of the things that also connects all the staff I have met here is their willingness to learn and to showcase learning. I think that is so important.

Ms TIERNEY — To what degree do you incorporate the knowledge of the individual student in developing those plans?

Mr FANKHAUSER — An enormous amount of data analysis. For myself, I can say I analyse every single response to every single question on every single test that every student does. Then I print out individualised areas of concern for each student. That just takes an enormous amount of time and effort, but it gives them individualised feedback and lets them know where they need to pursue particular areas of their work.

Ms TIERNEY — So it is very detailed pinpointing?

Mr FANKHAUSER — For me, that is the way I have undertaken it, yes.

Ms TIERNEY — What different approaches do other teachers have?

Mr HOWARTH — From a broader perspective, again getting back to managing their own learning, obviously there is goal setting, but there is also understanding that each one of the students is on their own individual learning journey and so they are progressing at different rates in different areas. Often they will naturally be competitive. I guess students in mainstream schools ask to some degree, but often when they get a test result back they will ask. They like to find out where they are situated. We try to let the students know that their result is about themselves, and it is about their own personal learning. So just making that connection with them, building it into the specific feedback and working with them on their goals is all part of personalising the learning.

Ms DESAULNIERS — I teach mathematics. We pre-test the students. We do individual tests and we give them a printout of exactly where they are at for that topic. If they have completed five of the six areas, then they do not need to do any work in that area, but they would need to finish any areas that they are weak in, so they complete that topic and then we give them extension work. So every kid is working on an individual program — every kid is working on something different in mathematics.

Ms MILLER — How many students are offered places under the equity consideration, and do these students face particular challenges?

The CHAIR — We will save that one for the Principal.

Mr ELASMAR — Your submission says that teachers at Nossal develop innovative curriculum and teaching resources and practices and high-quality effective teaching strategies to be shared with teachers throughout the state. Can you give examples of how Nossal shares its knowledge, resources and expertise on this issue?

Mr FANKHAUSER — I know we have started having a close relationship with Melbourne High — our science department, that is — and that has been very interesting. We have spent some time with them, and they will be coming over here and spending time with us. Those connections and getting a rapport with those teachers have been absolutely invaluable for me, and knowing what difficulties they have faced in certain areas and how I can overcome them more efficiently has been terrific. For me, it is the connection that I have made with Melbourne High that has been really good.

Ms DESAULNIERS — We also have a connection with the Monash school of science. They are a year ahead of us. We accelerated a large group of our students, and Monash did the same thing, and found out that we had a few problems. We got together and worked out how they corrected their problems, and we jumped on board as well to see how we could alleviate some of the problems we have with accelerating a large number of students. It was a valuable discussion with them.

Ms BLANEY — I think also part of what we have been working on or been encouraged to do is to share our resources on the ultranet. Although it is obviously in its infancy, we are still encouraged to kind of get what we can operating on that sharing system. Hopefully, when it gets to that stage 3 or whatever it is, other teachers will be encouraged to look at what work is happening here as well, so it could be another access point for sharing what we are doing here.

Mr HOWARTH — I currently have the honour of representing Nossal interstate. I currently have the position of the Nossal fellowship. I just recently returned from Tasmania. I spoke at the gifted education conference down there and presented some of the ideas of what we are doing here at Nossal. Obviously in a presentation it is not one-way information; lots of information can get back, with lots of contacts and interactions. There are three select entry schools in Queensland that I visited this year, and I was able to share what we are doing, build those connections and bring back what they are doing as we further build and our school evolves.

Toni, the Assistant Principal, and myself also spoke last year at the ACEL conference in Sydney to present our school, to get our name out there and to build the contacts and the connections. That was an international conference, so it was not only Australia-wide but building international links, so that we are further building knowledge and transferring information not only from our school out there but from the community into our school, to further build the capacity of the school to meet the needs of our students.

Ms MILLER — How does Nossal support the students emotionally?

Ms DESAULNIERS — I think this is probably the most important part of Nossal High School because I think a lot of our kids have come from schools where they are the only high-flyer in the school. I think especially some of the girls sort of dumb down their work so that they do not look like they are smart, whereas here academic excellence is absolutely applauded. The kids just adore the top flying kids here, and it is okay to be a real nerd here. It is all right to be really, really, really smart. It is okay and it is accepted.

We have tutorial groups here that bond. The tutorial teacher takes the group for a tutorial every morning and teaches them. There is a real sense of wellbeing at the school. The kids really bond together. We make sure they have a buddy. We make sure there are no loners, and we look out for the other kids. If somebody is sitting on their own, we say, ‘How about going over and making sure they are included within the Nossal community?’.

Ms MILLER — You talked about a buddy. Is that a student buddy or maybe a teacher and student?

Ms DESAULNIERS — Yes, a student buddy. But some of the kids actually latch themselves onto teachers as well. I know one kid was buddied up with a teacher and sort of annoyed him for a while — I mean, we put up with that — and then sort of attached onto another teacher, who said, ‘Oh, I’ve had him for a month’. The kid felt okay to have that relationship with the teacher. I think they were at an academic level and they just liked to talk, in this case, mathematics at a high level and so they felt that the teachers were the ones to do that, so they buddied up, but mostly it is students to students and they keep an eye out for each other.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our formal questions. Is there anything that any of you individually would like to say that you think has not been picked up in the questions and answers that you think might assist the committee in any way?

Mr HOWARTH — I just think that a school like Nossal, a select entry school, caters for like-minded students and supports students in a way that they have probably never been supported before. Parents have said that, some students have said that and teachers have acknowledged that in terms of the connections that students are making with their learning. I guess we are obviously advocates. A lot of the teachers have come from a mainstream setting. They have not necessarily been in a select entry school before, but having been here and having worked with the students we know the sky is the limit; the potential is there. There is not necessarily a dumbing down by students or putting a lid on it in order to maintain those social connections with their peers. I think the evidence stands for itself in terms of the students and how they can fly, if they are given the opportunity.

Mr FANKHAUSER — Also I believe there is a culture — an ethos — here that does not just happen, even in a gifted school, that has been very well planned and thought out. You hear the phrase, ‘learning community’ a lot, but to actually be a part of the real deal is a very exciting thing.

Ms BLANEY — Just to add to what both Wayne and Stuart have said, it is really important not just for students but for teachers as well, because it gives students an opportunity to fly high and to reach their potential but also it provides the same thing for teachers, and they may not have those opportunities in all schools. I love it.

The CHAIR — Excellent. Thank you.

Ms DESAULNIERS — Previously I was at a school that had a SEAL program. Within that program the students felt quite comfortable in their small classroom, but as soon as they left the confines of that classroom they were still looked down upon. They were not included in the school community, whereas here everyone is in the same boat. There is much more of a community here, and it is not just a small group over there that is the SEAL group. It is a whole community here at Nossal.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your contribution today. What you have been able to give us is very important. We will take all of your comments on board.

Witnesses withdrew.